

# FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

June 2002 • Number 7

## The Living Arrangements of New Unmarried Mothers

### Background

Non-marital childbearing has increased dramatically during the past three decades. Whereas in 1970 approximately 12 percent of all births in the United States were to unmarried mothers, today over one-third of births occur outside of marriage. In response to this trend, researchers have become increasingly interested in the living arrangements of unmarried parents. Understanding parents' choices of living arrangements can shed light on family formation processes and tell us about children's access to social and economic resources.

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [SEE BOX, page 2] to describe the living arrangements of new, unwed mothers and their children and to see what factors are associated with mother's choices of living arrangements. The analysis examines parents' characteristics, as well as the quality of their relationships.

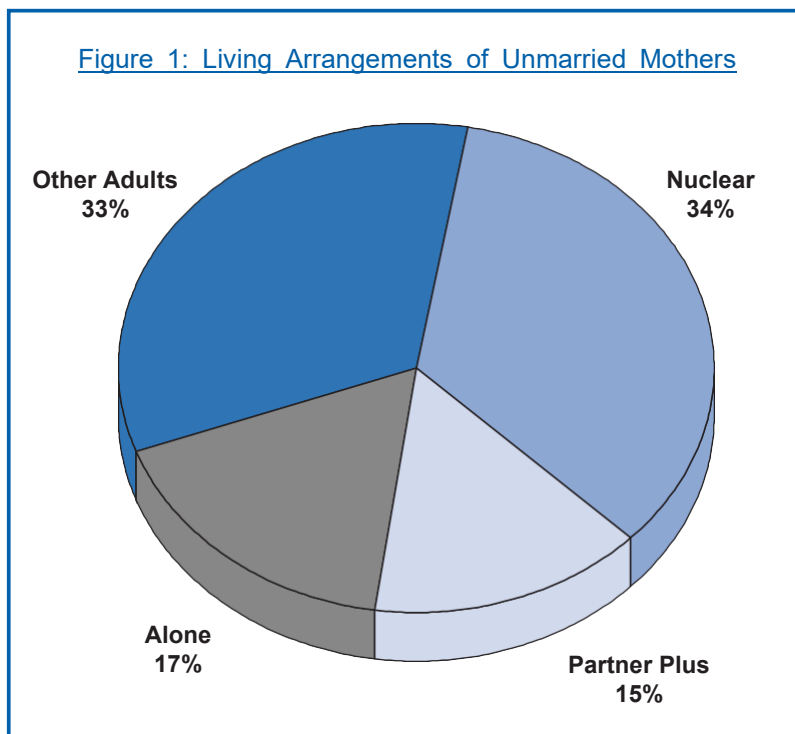
### Mothers' Living Arrangements

Just under half of all unmarried mothers are living with the fathers of their baby at the time of birth. One third are living in a "nuclear" household - one in which the mother, father and child are living together with no other adults, while 15 percent live with at least one other adult in a "partner plus" arrangement (Figure 1). Of the 51 percent of unmarried mothers that are *not* living with the baby's father, two-thirds are living with other adults and one-third are living alone.

Mothers' living arrangements are strongly associated with age, education and parity. Mothers under the age of 20 are less likely to live alone or in a nuclear arrangement and are more likely to

live with other adults. (Table 1 - See page 2) Ten percent of teenage mothers live alone as compared with 25 percent of mothers ages 30-34. Nearly one half (46 percent) of teenage mothers live with other adults as compared with only 21 percent of mothers age 30-34. Mothers with a high school degree have a greater probability of living in a nuclear household (44 percent as compared with 38 percent for mothers who have less than a high school degree). Conversely, mothers with a high school degree have a decreased probability of living in a partner plus arrangement (9 percent for those with a degree versus 14 percent for those with no high school degree). Finally, mothers with other children are much more likely to cohabit or live alone and much less likely to double up with other adults than mothers who are having their first child.

Figure 1: Living Arrangements of Unmarried Mothers



Relationship quality and substance abuse are also strongly related to mothers' living arrangements. Mothers who report having a high quality relationship with the father are significantly more likely to cohabit, either in nuclear or partner plus arrangements than mothers who report low quality relationships (Table 2 - See page 2). A one standard deviation increase in relationship quality score is associated with a ten percent increase in nuclear partnerships, from 44 percent to 49 percent. Similarly, nuclear partnerships are much more common among parents who do not use drugs. If neither parent is a drug user, the chances of living

in a nuclear household are 44 percent; when both parents are drug users, the chances drop to 15 percent.

Finally, there is substantial variation across cities in living arrangements. Doubling up with other adults is much more common in cities with high housing costs while nuclear living arrangements are actually less likely in these cities.

The most significant effects of housing costs are on rates of living alone with a \$150 decrease in the cost of housing associated with a 36 percent increase in living alone (not shown in tables). A \$150 increase in the cost of housing is associated with a 29 percent decrease in living alone. Welfare generosity also affects living arrangements, although the effects are much weaker.

## Policy Implications

Mothers' choices of living arrangements are strongly related to their human capital and social capital, with older, more educated mothers being more likely to live alone or cohabit in nuclear arrangements and younger, less educated mothers being more likely to double up with other adults. Therefore, we should be careful not to attribute differences in economic status across households to living arrangements per se when they are more likely due to differences in the capabilities of the mothers who sort themselves into different types of households. Our results suggest that programs designed to promote two-parent families may be more successful if targeted on certain types of households rather than others. Couples in nuclear households not only have more human capital and less drug use than other couples, they also report higher quality relationships with the father, suggesting that they and their children are more likely to benefit from policies that promote union formation.

Table 1: Probabilities Of Living Arrangements By Mothers' Age, Education And Parity

	Nuclear	Partner Plus	Alone	Other Adults
Age Under 20	0.35	0.09	0.10	0.46
Age 20-24	0.44	0.09	0.14	0.33
Age 25-29	0.46	0.07	0.23	0.25
Age 30-34	0.47	0.07	0.25	0.21
Age 35+	0.50	0.03	0.24	0.23
No High School Degree	0.38	0.14	0.14	0.33
High School Degree	0.44	0.09	0.14	0.33
More Than High School	0.41	0.01	0.14	0.35
First Birth	0.28	0.09	0.07	0.57
Higher Order Birth	0.44	0.09	0.14	0.33

Table 2: Probabilities Of Living Arrangements By Relationship Quality and Drug Use.

	Nuclear	Partner Plus	Alone	Other Adults
<b>Relationship Quality</b>				
Mean Quality	0.44	0.09	0.14	0.33
Up 0.25 Points	0.49	0.10	0.11	0.29
<b>Drug Use</b>				
No Drug Use	0.44	0.09	0.14	0.33
Mother's Use Only	0.25	0.13	0.14	0.48
Father's Use Only	0.30	0.10	0.15	0.45
Both Use	0.15	0.13	0.14	0.58

**Note:** The numbers in Tables 1 and 2 are predicted probabilities adjusted for differences in parents' age, education, health, race, parity and city of residence.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm> or email the CRCW at [crcw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:crcw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "The Living Arrangements of New Unmarried Mothers," by Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Sara McLanahan. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.

The Fragile Families Research Brief is funded in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We also thank the Joint Center for Poverty Research for helping to disseminate this brief.